



**“Y en El 57 Me Casé Con Él y Fue Por Él Que Me Quedé Aquí en Ohio”:  
Narrative Voice in Latina/o/e Oral Histories**

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*“Tenían campos de migrants y allí muchos de ellos vivían. Y allí iban muchos de las organizaciones de las iglesias y les enseñaban movies, y les enseñaban la limpieza, y les enseñaban muchas cosas... y cuando yo iba con las enfermeras y el doctor era mucha para enseñarles la limpieza y la cuidada de los niños en los campos y todo.” (Ignacia Rodríguez, 2014)*

*“Sí vinieron más familiares, despacito comenzaron. Bueno con el tiempo de calor que viene la gente a los trabajos, a veces se quedaba una familia y a veces otra y con el tiempo... este... había varias familias que se quedaban aquí a trabajar en fábricas... hallaban casas para vivir y a rentar o comprar y con el tiempo habían más familias, habían más de nosotros. Había varias familias. Eso estaba bueno.” (Tolentino Rodríguez, 2014)*

The practice of oral history is inherently dialogic. It is one that promotes reciprocity as both narrators and interviewers come together to learn and reflect on their stories. In this essay, I consider oral history as a form of testimonio, a genre that, as Elisa Gonzales (2024) explains, “holds space for the Latinx performer/creator to remember, rewrite, reimagine, and reclaim [their] stories through the intersections of history and memory” (p. 348). In oral history interviews, as in written testimonios, narrators embody the task of reliving and recounting their own life experiences as they tell stories of joy, sadness, conflict and adversity. In oral history this exchange can happen in real time through interactions with those conducting oral history interviews or later, as we read transcripts, to learn and understand their stories. Oral history, then, as a primary text helps us incorporate and understand how Latinas/os/es engage in memory and testimony as tools for writing ourselves into history (Anzaldúa, 1987; Felman & Laub, 1992; Flores-Ortiz, 2001; Quintana, 1982). Using literary works and oral histories as primary texts for analysis provides a critical framework for exploring the “Latino imaginary” (Flores, 2000) while also investigating the complexity of U.S. Latina/o/e communities. In this sense both literary testimonio and oral history call attention to the complicated history of Latina/o/e life in the U.S. as experienced in the past and in the present, exposing previously erased epistemologies of place, self, and belonging and showcasing the languages of our communities. Oral history, like novels, can offer alternative and more complete

ways to understand how official history has been recorded, demanding that the listener/reader reckon with alternative narratives as parallels to official history. Even more, we as listeners/readers are put in the position to bear witness as the narrators recount their memories.

There are striking similarities between the practice of oral history and the novel. The novel can be (and has been) used historically to intensify social awareness of present and past events, while at the same time calling for social change. Mihail Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination* explains that the nature of the novel is to employ heteroglossia where language acquires meaning within a specific social context. This principle ensures that each utterance will have a different meaning according to the place and time in which it is uttered. Bakhtin writes about the dialogic nature of the novel in which there is a “constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1982, p. 426). The novel informs a set of social beliefs and practices and provides a place where authors resist *authoritative discourse* in favor of *internally persuasive discourse* (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1982, p. 342). The dialogic interaction between these two opposing categories “usually [determines] the history of an individual ideological consciousness” (Bakhtin & Holquist, 1982, p. 342). While fiction writers are free to choose and imagine the historical framework for their novels, narrators of oral history use their narrative voice to take control of their own stories by providing their individual first-person narratives and perspectives, often situated within a specific time and context. As such, oral history and literature are discursive practices that intersect representation and reality and, in the process, allow us to discover truth. Indeed, they create a counter hegemonic representation of history with points of view previously forgotten or ignored.

Most oral histories include the digitization of the narrators’ own personal records such as letters, newspaper clippings, and photographs which allow us to think of the heteroglossic nature of oral history. “Heteroglossia,” a term coined by Bakhtin (1982) refers to the existence of two or more voices within a text. If we think of the ephemera included in many oral history archives, we can understand these voices as helping us hear/read multiple points of views. Later, as I will show in my analysis of the oral history<sup>1</sup> of a couple married for over 50 years (Tolentino and Ignacia Rodríguez) who were interviewed together, understanding how heteroglossia deepens an oral history will help us see how each of them fills in the gaps of their own historical—sometimes gendered—recollections to provide us with a complex picture of what life was like when they arrived in the small town of Celina, Ohio in the 1950s. Tolentino and Ignacia Rodríguez were interviewed together in the Spring of 2014. Don Tolentino is from Lytton Spring, Texas and Doña Ignacia was born in China, Nuevo León, México, but grew up on the “Tres Cheques” Ranch in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. They met picking tomatoes in 1956. They describe their journey and their decision to stay as follows:

Don Tolentino (DT):<sup>2</sup> Bueno pues, era una aventura. Era una, you know, como estábamos jóvenes... No, no... Sí era duro, pero no comprendimos eso no es. Éramos chamacones todavía. Yo tenía 12 años y para mí era una aventura. Pues sí, sí era duro para trabajar en la pisca de tomates, con el azadón, el tomate, el espárrago. Sí, trabajamos muy duro.

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<sup>1</sup>Tolentino and Ignacia Rodríguez were interviewed (video recorded) by Elena Foulis in Celina, Ohio in April 2014. *Oral Narratives of Latin@s in Ohio* Archives, Center for Folklore Studies, <https://cfs.osu.edu/archives/collections/ONLO/ignacia-y-tolentino-rodriguez>

<sup>2</sup>The original transcript leaves the Spanish variation of Texan Spanish. No changes were made to standardize their linguistic variation.

Doña Ignacia (DI): Y nosotros íbamos y veníamos cada año. Del rancho donde vivíamos en El Valle, de allí veníamos cada año. Y en el 57 me casé con él y fue por él que me quedé aquí en Ohio.

\* \* \*

DT: Well, it was an adventure. It was, you know, since we were young ... No, no ... Yes, it was hard, but we didn't know that. We were young still. I was 12 and for me it was an adventure. Well, yes, it was hard to work picking tomatoes, with the hoe, tomatoes, asparagus. Yes, we worked hard.

DI: And we traveled back and forth each year from the ranch where we lived. From the ranch where we lived in the Valley, we came every year from there. And in '57, I married him, and that's why I stayed here in Ohio.

The dialogical nature of oral history is a critical memory practice and, like novels, activates all our senses as we listen to or read each story. In Tolentino and Ignacia's oral history, it is clear that their life experiences were marked by how they experienced events in a narrative in which they are the central characters, but also as witnesses to how others experienced arriving to Ohio to look for jobs and community. To fully comprehend the memory of places, smells, sounds, taste, physical feelings and visions that our narrators describe within their stories or even as situated in the places where they choose to be interviewed, these sensorial elements are significant to how we understand their point of view. In her work on oral history and the senses, Paula Hamilton (2016) explains that "senses and the embodied experience are sometimes outside language, not just something one sees and hears, but something one lives" (p.107) and suggests that how narrators describe those experiences is necessarily situated within the past. Hence, as we analyze the text/audio, we are asked not just to imagine what that past might have been like but also to recognize that the memory of that particular experience was prompted by the narrators' experience of one (or all five) of their senses.

Tolentino and Ignacia's oral history also highlights what Jill Ker Conway (1998), in her book *When Memory Speaks* describes as "Abrupt transitions and shifting narrative styles [that] are sure signs that their authors are struggling to overcome the cultural taboos that define women as witnesses rather than actors in [their] life's events" (p. 88). This insight, while focusing on women, also applies to the oral histories of minoritized communities. Indeed, many Latina/o/e writers use a similar narrative in which someone in the family encourages the protagonist to write or to tell the stories of the family. Gayle Greene (1991) explains that "feminism is a re-membling, a re-assembling of our lost pasts and lost part of ourselves" (p. 300). In oral history, narrators are encouraged and given the space to relate their life histories, to re-member their own individual histories, and to re-assemble our understanding of the community they represent.

Oral history centers the narrator's knowledge, narrative voice, and agency, pushing us to consider how to critically understand the histories we hear along with the linguistic and cultural practices they use which are often tied to intersectional experiences of racialization and marginalization (Crenshaw, 2022; Foulis & Alex, 2021). Indeed, in understanding oral histories of Latina/o/e communities as memory practice, their histories become counter-stories that embody agency (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Furthermore, I consider Miranda Fricker's (2009) description of epistemic injustice in the form of testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice given that minoritized communities have historically experienced low credibility (testimonial injustice) driven by prejudice and stereotype often fueled by racism and within a society that has disregarded their

experiences as sources of knowledge and value. Minoritized communities have also been disadvantaged in enacting their own agency (hermeneutical injustice) due to inequitable power systems and structures that maintain the status quo of the majority. Furthermore, studying oral history as testimonio helps us see the power of collective identity and community alliance as narrators engage in self-representation, affirm cultural identity, and describe experiences tied to gender and class struggles.

Listening/reading and analyzing the Rodríguezes' history helps us understand the history of Latinas/os/es in Ohio in relation to other Latina/o/e groups in the state and elsewhere in the U.S. Don Tolentino y Doña Ignacia met when they both worked in the fields in the 1950s. They both moved to the area due to agricultural work and then decided to stay, build their home, and raise a family there. They were active members of their community and helped newcomers with translation services, housing and other aspects of their transition to Ohio. Their memories of place paint a picture of what this little town of Celina (still a small town) was like when they arrived:

DT: Pues, para mí la cultura era diferente porque no habían tanto mexicanos. La gente hablaba más inglés. Aquí nadie hablaba español. Como nosotros éramos uno de los primeros que estaban aquí, como se dice "settle... settle out". Era un poquito, era diferente. No muy difícil, pero sí. Como que nosotros hablábamos inglés, pero también hablábamos español y no había cualquien que comunicar en español. Y eso era lo más diferente.

DI: Sí, cuando me casé sí era difícil. Por los primeros dos años, me quería yo regresar pa'l Valle porque echaba de menos a mi mamá y mis hermanas y mis hermanos. Pero ya después me impuse ya después de los cinco años entonces. Ya me impuse. Comenzamos a tener familia y fue diferente.

\* \* \*

DT: Well, culture was different because there weren't a lot of Mexicans. People spoke mostly in English. No one spoke Spanish. Since we were one of the first to arrive, how do you call that, "settle... settle out." It was a bit different. Not too difficult, but yes. Since we spoke English, but we also spoke Spanish and there was no one to communicate in Spanish. And that was the biggest difference.

DI: Yes, when I married it was difficult. The first two years, I wanted to go back to the Valley because I missed my mom, sisters, and brothers. But I got used to it after five years. I got used to it. We started having children, and it was different.<sup>3</sup>

Building community is an important and immediate need for many migrants. Although we can assume that the Rodríguezes knew or heard that this place would be different from South Texas, both narrators here expressed the shock of encountering a new culture: the absence of Spanish and the void they felt (especially Doña Ignacia) in leaving family. As we read the transcription, we can see that at times Don Tolentino speaks for both of them when he says, "We were one of the first to arrive" and "We also both spoke Spanish" to express a shared experience, while Doña Ignacia, in this example, signals her own feeling when she was first married and missed her family. Indeed, in this example, we can see how our narrators alternate from a shared experience to an individual one,

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<sup>3</sup>All translations done by author.

a technique that also helps us understand how many Mexicans who arrived in these years might have felt.

Elena Foulis, interviewer (EF): ¿Ustedes formaron parte de algún tipo de organización para las personas que hablaban español, para los mexicanos que venían para acá?

DT: Sí, éramos miembros de La Raza Unida y Bowling Green... y éramos miembros de... Formamos un chapter aquí de Mexican-American United aquí en Mercer County.

EF: ¿En qué año fue eso? ¿Se acuerda?

DT: Eso no me acuerdo muy bien en que año era... Era como los 60s.

DI: No, era como el 71 o 72 porque tu papá todavía vivía y cuando teníamos juntas tu papá. Iba también. Tu papá falleció el 73. It had to be in the 70s. 71 or something like that.

DT: Y también comenzamos una iglesia para mexicanos con el Father Howard. Una iglesia católica. Éramos los primeros miembros. Varios amigos nos juntamos... para arreglar un lugar, pintar, you know, limpiar, para y todo tener una iglesia en español. So, sí, estábamos como se dice “active” en eso... muy active... Este íbamos a las juntas y [ellos] hablaban y escuchaban lo que estábamos platicando y creo que en este tiempo abrió un poquito más la cabeza a pensar de los derechos, de las obligaciones y todas esas cosas que necesitamos saber para ser más miembro de la comunidad.

\* \* \*

EF: Did you form part of some type of organization for Spanish speakers, for Mexicans who were coming here?

DT: Yes, we were member of La Raza Unida and Bowling Green, and we were members of... We started a chapter here of Mexican-American United, here in Mercer County.

EF: What year was that? Do you remember?

DT: I don't remember very well what year. It was ... like the 60s.

DI: No, it was 71 or 72 because your dad was still alive, and we had meetings. Your dad attended, too. Your dad passed away in 73. It had to be in the 70s. 71 or something like that.

DT: We also started a church for Mexicans with Father Howard. A Catholic church. We were the first members. Many friends got together... to fix up a place, paint, you know, clean and all, to have a church in Spanish. So, yes, we were, you could say, “active” in that... very active... We went to meetings, and [they] talked and discussed what we were saying, and I think at that time our minds were open to think about our rights, obligations, and all of those things we needed to know to be a community member.

## Figure 1

Picture of Doña Ignacia and Don Tolentino seating at their restaurant in Celina, OH.



This part of the oral history shows how our narrators are recounting, remembering, and reassembling important dates within the historical Chicano movement (1965-1975) and the organizations that formed as a result of this movement. Importantly, too, we see that in recalling their participation and Doña Ignacia’s interjection with the correct dates, they enact testimonial speech that situates them within key historical moments. Even more, as they tell us about their involvement, we witness their own coming to consciousness when Don Tolentino names organizations such as La Raza Unida and Mexican American United and later as he says that they were “very active.” Significant, too, is what he says about belonging and being part of a community, which includes understanding their “rights and obligations.”

### Memory and Testimony

In oral history, narrators are constantly engaging in memory and testimony, which are important elements of study. Pierre Nora (1989) in *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire* (1989) suggests that because Western society is marked by the break between memory and history, our need to rescue and preserve the past is directly related to our unwillingness to forget it which allows one to create *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory. The collection and preservation of oral histories can be understood as creating sites of memory as narrators engage in claiming the past. Their stories help us make sense of the present. Like other forms of testimonio, oral histories fill-in historical blanks of nonhegemonic groups which have often been left out and excluded from national history. As Gonzales (2024) argues, “testimonio begins as the space where truth is missing” (p. 348). Oral history helps reconstruct historical moments and allows narrators to write themselves back into history, while at the same time providing those of us who study them an instrument of critical reflection on both the present and past conditions of the narrators’ lives. Nora (1989) explains:

*Lieux de mémoire* originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally. The defense, by certain minorities, of a privileged memory that has retreated to jealously protected enclaves in this sense intensely illuminates the truth of *lieux de mémoire*—that without

commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away. We buttress our identities upon such bastions, but if what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need to build them. (p.12)

What Nora implies is that because hegemonic groups have controlled official history and continue to do so with recent legislation to ban books and control whose history is allowed into classrooms, they threaten to erase the history of minoritized groups. Yet, the practice of oral history collection and analysis offers a venue to fight back. Therefore, an important point of analysis is to ask ourselves:

- How do narrators re-appropriate their memories and the memories of their community to find their own agency?
- Why do they choose to paint a picture that might not be the true reflection of hardship they found in the new environment and the people they encountered?

Latin America and Latina/o/e communities in the US, in particular women, have engaged in the practice of testimonio (Brabeck, 2003; Huber, 2009) as an oral history practice to bear witness and create bonds among other women of color because as this gives them, as Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (2015) note, the opportunity to relay what they have experienced in the flesh through their writing. In Latin America, testimonio has been explained in cultural and literary analysis as the opportunity to make public stories of oppression and abuse, regularly using first person narratives but often referring to a collective (de Alba Acevedo, 2001; Doris, 2019; Menchú, 1984). Anzaldúa's work continues to be the core text for understanding the value and need to write our histories in our own voices. As a Panlatina/o/e practice, testimonio is embodied agency. Interpreting oral histories as testimonio helps us see the value of storytelling as one that helps us understand individual and collective histories of older and newer generations and how they make sense of their own migration stories in relation to the place where they live. Furthermore, oral histories can help us achieve testimonial justice for a community that has often experienced testimonial injustice because of their marginalized positioning within U.S. society. Testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2009) is enacted because of the dominant society's values are often informed by prejudice and stereotypes of a group. In the U.S., this would include the speaker's use of Spanish, other bilingual practices, and their accent which can affect their credibility. If a community has suffered a credibility deficit simply by the way they speak or their perceived immigration status based purely on phenotypical characteristics, then the community has often been unheard or patronized. Understanding this condition then makes the reading/hearing of oral histories even more crucial to move towards testimonial justice and agency. The Rodríguezes did not recall or choose to reveal instances of discrimination; nevertheless, it is clear in their story that a place like Celina, Ohio was unfamiliar with Mexican people or the Spanish language, and they lacked the services needed to make this migrant community feel welcomed or might give them a sense of belonging. It was, in fact, the Rodríguez's own efforts, involvement, and their positioning as the "elders" of the community—by being some of the first Mexican-American residents—that facilitated their advocacy to provide the services needed for this community. The evidence they provide by naming key organizations and dates tying their efforts to those of the Chicano movements helps us arrive at that conclusion.

While we can fruitfully use the techniques of literary analysis to understand oral histories, I want to stress that these materials are not fictional. Hence, we must be careful about analyzing

something that can potentially bring harm to our narrators or erase and obscure their intention or even how they imagined their world. For this, I take us to Katherine Borland's 1991 article in which she interviews her grandmother Beatrice about her life in the 1930s. In this interview, her grandmother discusses aspects of her father that Borland later examines within a feminist perspective that, although valid, seems to trouble the memories that her grandmother had of her father. Indeed, as Borland (2016) suggests with the title of the article, "That's Not What I Said," referring to her grandmother's reaction when she showed her the essay about her life written within a feminist approach, we must pause to consider how our analysis can create a version of the person's story that had not been intended. As a feminist scholar, Borland (1991) found Beatrice's story significant in the way that this self-performativity within the narrated event "functions to assert a sense of female autonomy and equality within a sphere dominated by men [horses and horse racing]" (p. 417). When Borland (2016) eventually shares her analysis with her narrator, Beatrice feels that Borland's analysis is incomplete, inaccurate, and insensitive. Beatrice tells her:

You've read into the story what you wished for—what pleases YOU. That it was never—by any widest stretch of the imagination—the concern of the originator of the story makes such an interpretation, a definite and complete distortion, and in this respect I question its authenticity. The story is no longer MY story at all. The skeleton remains, but it has become your story. How far is it permissible to go, in the name of folklore, and still be honest in respect to the original narrative? (p. 418)

While Borland holds that our analysis and final product is not contingent upon the research collaborators, she does suggest that we be open about communicating the possibilities of the data collected and be sensitive when negotiating issues of interpretative authority.

However, I find that a better way to write and think about oral history analysis is through Elaine Lawless's (2019) reciprocal ethnography in which,

Deep listening to people we respect and honor as equal participants in our work reveals the promise of a different kind of knowledge building based on long-term ethnography. We have aligned ourselves with them, working to help them locate a space to tell their story, to speak their truth, even as they seek those who are willing to listen. I have spent my career listening to the voices of women in the places and spaces where they can be heard, honoring their words and writing *with* them a story that others need to hear. The audience for this kind of effort has come to recognize reciprocal ethnography as a legitimate way to seek social justice, equality, and transformation, when the stakes are especially high and when women's voices are too easily dismissed. (p. 6)

In oral history, as much as in folklore's collection of oral narratives, the interpretative approach should be reciprocal and deeply reflective. While we might engage with an oral history text or audio that was collected by others, prioritizing listening and humanizing the voices on the text remind us that the narrators have agency, even as they relate stories that we might identify as an example of the gender dynamics or oppressive politics of the time. Because these are not works of fiction, we must consider the original intentionality of the narrators. This should add a layer of care and commitment where the narrators trust us, as readers or listeners, to handle their testimonios/oral histories with caution and respect.

Unlike Borland, Lawless's reaction of her own interpretation by a narrator made her change her approach altogether and consider the role dialogue and shared ownership play in the narrator's story. She suggests that we, in our own analysis, should contemplate "[giving] up the notion of scholar voice as privileged voice, the scholar's position as more legitimate because it is the more thoughtful or more credible one" (Lawless, 2019, p. 92) and, instead, focus on how the narrator's story advances our own understanding of different cultural contexts, our own differently informed contexts and theoretical frameworks that can potentially remove agency of the text or the narrators' voices. Lawless (2019) concludes that "the final phase of our hermeneutic circle, then, demands that we subject our interpretations to the interpretations of our subjects" (p. 94). It is true that when we analyze oral history, we are unlikely to have the opportunity to co-create a critical analysis of the narrator's life story, yet by reminding ourselves that oral histories are narrated by real subjects and that our own historical context can affect how we understand their stories, we can arrive at a more just and deliberate interpretation of them.

### Exploring Language

Latina/o/e communities in the U.S. are frequently bilingual and bicultural; therefore, understanding their linguistic capital is important as it reveals practices that narrators follow. In her description of linguistic capital in the context of schools, Tara Yosso (2005) says:

Linguistic capital reflects the idea that Students of Color arrive at school with multiple language and communication skills. In addition, these children most often have been engaged participants in a storytelling tradition, that may include listening to and recounting oral histories, parables, stories (*cuentos*) and proverbs (*dichos*). This repertoire of storytelling skills may include memorization, attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm and rhyme. Linguistic capital also refers to the ability to communicate via visual art, music or poetry. Just as students may utilize different vocal registers to whisper, whistle or sing, they must often develop and draw on various language registers, or styles, to communicate with different audiences. (pp. 78-79)

Certainty, "reading" oral history with a literary analysis approach allows us to closely read the transcript, language use, dialogue, and even the gaps that often occur when narrators skip certain details or move in a different direction than what the questions asked, intentionally or not.

Oral history is also a cultural memory practice dense with narrative techniques such as *dichos*, *consejos*, humor, sounds, and other techniques that are tied to their narrators' cultural practices which can be missed if we only read a transcript. So, considering the cultural practices, historical context, and regional experiences of our subjects are key to fully understanding the depth of their stories; hence, both audio and transcript are important texts to analyze. Alessandro Portelli (2016) expressed this additional challenge when he compared "doing art criticism on reproductions or... literary criticism on translations" (p. 50), when we read the transcript instead of listening to the original audio recording. Furthermore, a transcript cannot convey emotions or reproduce regional linguistic accents or sounds that can help us understand a narrator's story better. I find similarity with the critical analysis of novels; that is, in order to understand a text, we must understand key historical and cultural contexts, colloquial language, and gender dynamics of the time and consider the conditions of production, meaning was the text a translation, a script of a play

that was originally performed, a speech? Therefore, reading transcriptions cannot replace or forgo an informed reader, especially if those transcriptions were created by computer software, are generated using AI technology, or produced by a culturally and linguistically uninformed transcriber. Without a doubt, our understanding and analysis always will be incomplete because of the inherent tensions between original expression and production/re-production. Portelli (2016) argues that the audio is “composed of another set of traits, which cannot be contained within a single segment... The tone and volume range and the rhythm of popular speech carry implicit meaning and social connotations which are not reproducible in writing” (p. 50). Thus, we should also keep in mind the presence of heteroglossia, given that each feature reveals a deeper understanding of the narrator’s context. Portelli (2016) tells us that oral history is narrative and that our analysis of oral history sources “must avail itself of some of the general categories developed by narrative theory in literature and folklore” (p. 51). Indeed, there is an artistic form to the way we can analyze oral history interviews that weaves thematic elements, voice, and point of view as well as truth and imagination. Portelli (2016) argues that oral histories allow for speaker subjectivity and argues that

oral sources, especially from nonhegemonic groups, are a very useful integration of other sources as far as the *fabula*—the logical casual sequence of the story—goes; but they become unique and necessary because of their *plot*—the way in which the story materials are arranged by narrators in order to tell [their] story. The organization of the narrative reveals a great deal of the speaker’s relationships to their history. (p. 52)

In this sense, the oral history is the text we read/hear and study to understand a person’s positionality, to understand the historical context of their own story, and to provide us with information about how they see themselves as witnesses to their community’s practices such as language and culture, for example. Portelli (2016) also highlights the importance of the original source (that is the audio) in helping us understand more thoroughly the narrator’s story, such as tone, rhythm, and volume. In addition to this, we should study the narrator’s speech patterns, sound, and linguistic practices (i.e., bilingual, code-switching, and translanguaging) as elements crucial to understanding the narrator’s history more completely. While I agree that the audio provides us with features that might be missed in a transcript, crucially, an uninformed listener (as much as an uninformed transcriber), can misinterpret or ignore key cultural and linguistic elements which can result in a misinterpretation or faulty analysis of a person’s life.

Certainly, in the examples I provide above, Don Tolentino and Doña Ignacia engage in translanguaging practices that are organic and commonly used in multilingual communities. We also hear/read their Spanish variation as used in the U.S. (i.e., *éranos/we were*), and if we listen to the audio, we can hear the distinct accent of bilingual speakers from Texas. A close analysis of language and the audio of the oral history, offers more details in understanding their language as inherently linked to their identity. Furthermore, the speed of their conversation, the relational ease of their answers—especially as they seem to interrupt each other—tells us more about the narrators’ family life. Notable, too, is how elements like laughter and the way the speakers often turned to look at each other, which might or might not be documented in the transcript but are captured and recorded in the audio, reveal details about their own relationship. In this particular oral history, the interview was recorded via video which added an additional layer for analysis.

EF: ¿Cuáles son algunas de las memorias de su juventud que a sus hijos les gusta escuchar de ustedes? ¿De ustedes juntos? ¿Y de ustedes antes de conocerse?

DT: A mí me gusta platicar [de] cuando estaba chamacón y cuando estaba... Todavía no estaba casado. No la conocía a ella. Y todas esas cosas que ellos no saben... Los tiempos que pasábamos. Me gusta platicar de “the old times.”

EF: ¿Cómo se conocieron? ¿Cómo fueron esos primeros... no sé... días, meses, semanas? ¿De haberse conocido?

DT: Creo que yo la conocía a esta señora el 5 de mayo, un Cinco de Mayo. Que estaban vendiendo, ella y su hermana, las dos hermanas estaban vendiendo... Tienen una mesita allí en el campo, el migrant camp. Estaban vendiendo algo; no me acuerdo que era. Y pasé por allí y digo, ¿esas muchachas quienes son? Y me iba a investigar. Eso fue la primera vez que la conocí. Yo creo que en un baile, allí en el north farm, había un baile. Asina despacito nos fuimos conociendo... y a la familia, porque tiene dos hermanos, su amá y la gente mía, de mi apá. Pues allí se conocían y platicaban.

\* \* \*

EF: What are some of your memories of when you were young that you tell your children? Of the both of you together? Of the each of you before you met?

DT: I like to talk of when I was young and when I was... not married yet. When I hadn't met her. And all of those things that they don't know... The way we passed the time. I love to talk about “the old times.”

EF: How did you meet? How were those first days, months, weeks after you met?

DT: When I met this lady, it was May 5th, a Cinco de Mayo. She was selling, her sister and her, both sister selling... they had a little table at the camp, the migrant camp. They were selling something; I don't remember what. So, I stopped by and I thought, who are these girls? So, I went to investigate. That was when I first met her. There was a dance there, at the north farm, there was a dance. So little by little we got to know each other... and then the family, because she has two brothers, her mom, and then my family, my dad. So, they met and talked to each other.

Although, in general, Doña Ignacia did not speak as much, her interventions were on point and with authority. Additionally, her body language, attentive listening, and reactions during the conversation provided an opportunity to see them interact as a couple. In Don Tolentino's peculiar way of relating the story of how they met, his use of words like “chamacón” and “esta señora” added an element of lightness and mischievousness that can be appreciated more via audio/video but certainly also in the transcript.

## Figure 2

*Picture of Doña Ignacia and Don Tolentino, smiling.*



Oral history engages with memory and testimony. When we work with marginalized communities who have experienced exclusion, oppression, and other forms of trauma, oral history can provide a deeper understanding of the individual and collective experience of the studied community. When analyzed as a primary text, whether in audio or text form, we can critically study the story as representative of a historical moment, as reflective of the narrator's context and time, and as emblematic of the language they use to describe their life. Language reflects one's identity and can provide information about the environment where the narrator grew up. For example, historically, Latinas/os/es have experienced linguistic violence through educational institutions that prohibited the use of Spanish. In fact, they were often physically punished for it. As a result, many generations did not speak or teach Spanish to their children to protect them from discrimination and racialization. If we do not discuss this historical occurrence, our analysis of narrators who prefer English over Spanish or do not speak Spanish might be seen as a mere choice or as the process of assimilation or Americanization. While for some this might be true, for most it was a matter of survival and a matter of fitting in (Cohen, 1974; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Valdés, 1996; Zentella, 2014). Importantly, too, what narrators say about their own language practices can provide us with information about experiences of joy and pain. For example, Foulis and Alex (2021) find that oral history performance can promote linguistic and cultural maintenance and a sense of belonging. For Bakhtin (1982), language:

lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. (p. 293-294)

Bakhtin (1982) refers to language as the novel's discourse which is suitable to our analysis of language practices in oral history, including the dialogue we hear between interviewer and narrator(s) and all of the other features mentioned above. For example, multilingual narrators often translanguage during their interviews which provides a rich point of analysis. In most cases, this is

a reflection of their linguistic practices tied to growing up in bilingual or multilingual environments. These practices do not exist in a vacuum but tell us about a community's self-representation and resilience. To understand translanguaging better, García and Otheguy (2020) describe it as a practice that,

Interrogates named languages, pointing to an answer that includes their being constructed by nation-states as a tool for the domination of language minoritized communities. The named language tool excludes these communities from social, political and economic opportunities by authorizing, legitimating, naturalizing and opening paths only to those who speak what is constructed as the common, autonomous and whole, national language. (p. 25)

If we read these practices as a holistic representation of our narrator's story, we are thinking about their voices as conduits of agency. Anzaldúa (1987) reminds us,

Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity-I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (p. 59)

Hence, a close reading shows us that when our narrators recount a story (for the purpose of this study) in Spanish, English, or Indigenous languages, they are also often attached to memories of place, cuisine, and people, and they reflect an emotional connection to them. In the next example, to understand how much the city of Celina was or became a community that welcomed others, I asked the narrators to discuss their cultural traditions. While the description points to the lack of a local music scene and spaces where Mexican traditions can be fostered and celebrated, it reveals that food was an important element of connection and continuity.

EF: ¿Había varias actividades de música o culturales aquí?

DT: No tanto, no.

DI: Tenemos que contratar conjunto de Toledo o Bowling Green que vinieran de otra parte o de Indiana. Aquí no había mucha actividad de música mexicana.

DT: En tiempo calor... que... el 72 o 73... comenzamos a vender comida mexicana en la feria, en Mercer County Fair.

DI: 72.

DT: 72, sí. Y eso era algo nuevo para la gente de aquí y no estábamos seguros si iban a recibir. No, pues, vinieron todos... Querían comer comida mexicana.

EF: Claro, algo nuevo y auténtico.

DT: Algo nuevo y diferente, you know. Y asina comenzó el negocio de nosotros, de vender comida en un restaurante. Porque la gente nos decían por qué no ponen un “restaurant” y en tiempo calor era muy apurado, mucho trabajo. Y era gratis porque no cobrábamos, era no más para el club. Para el Mexican-American club.

\* \* \*

EF: Were there musical or cultural events here?

DT: No, not much.

DI: We had to hire bands from Toledo or Bowling Green or from other places, like Indiana, to come. There was not much Mexican music activity here.

DT: During summer... in 72 or 73... we started selling Mexican food at the fair, at the Mercer County fair.

DI: 72.

DT: 72, yes. And that was something new for people here, and we didn't know how they would welcome us. Well, everyone came together... They all wanted to eat Mexican food.

EF: Of course, something new and authentic.

DT: Something new and different, you know. And that was how our business started, selling food at a restaurant. Because people would ask us why we didn't open a restaurant, but summer was very busy, lots of work. We didn't charge for our food, it was for the club. For the Mexican-American club.

Here, the Rodríguezes identified foodways previously unfamiliar to (or scare in) the region and an important connection to cultural practices. Indeed, they not only provided a need for community building via food and a physical space where people could enjoy it, they also seem to be first Latina/o/e own restaurant in the area.

## Conclusion

When we read literature, we often think of the narrator (or character) as people. We commit to their point of view, anticipate their decisions, and sometimes develop emotional attachments to them. We are sad or happy when something happens in the story, and we think about what the novel or author intended to show us through their writing. We speculate what elements of the story are factual or autobiographical. We, indeed, feel a kinship to fictional characters because sometimes we connect with their struggles, their decisions, their stories. We come to know the characters as much as we come to “know” our narrators through their oral histories. Literature and oral history share many elements and provide important points for analysis, yet oral histories demand a more

careful analysis because the stories we read or listen to are real. Certainly, both approaches require that we provide historical and cultural contexts, including the conditions under which the text was produced, to be better able to provide an informed evaluation of the texts/audio studied. In both cases, they add to our understanding of how they operate as counternarratives that challenge official history, where narrators are the subjects and writers of their own history and participate in knowledge production. Oral history, like testimonio, is embodied agency, that offers the opportunity for everyday people to evaluate their life and tell the stories no one has asked about before. The transcript provides a text to engage in dialogue with the historical presence of Latina/o/e communities and consider how epistemic injustices, at times, limited their ability to speak for themselves, authentically and without negative consequences. Oral history as critical memory practice invites us to actively engage with all our senses as we listen to or read the narrator's life story and make sense of our own.

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